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ABSTRACT

Four major changes have occurred in public policy education during the past 5-0 years. First, public policy educators have richer and more complicated discussions about the relative benefits of advocacy and objectivity in policy education. Second, public policy educators and community developers are moving toward a genuine merger of content and process, their respective strengths. Third, a richer and more complicated picture is developing of how public policy education impacts public understanding and the policy formation process. Fourth, educators are finding better language to talk about educational objectives and impacts. Interviews with citizens show that they are dissatisfied with politics, yet they are not apathetic to issues and they desire fair solutions. Interviews with policymakers reveal a similar degree of dissatisfaction with politics, but many of them have only limited views of how relationships with citizens could be different. The emerging public policy education concept resonates with a widely-recognized societal need for better ways to practice politics. (KS)

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INNOVATIONS IN PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION

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What is new or different about public policy education compared to five or ten years ago? Here are four things that seem new to me:

First of all, we have richer and more complicated discussions of advocacy. Most of us acknowledge that we advocate for education and for better-informed decisions; many advocate for more participation and for attention to specific issues or concerns; some advocate for particular *types* of solutions—in the form of, for example, "*any* solution as long as it takes environmental consequences into account" (Hahn, Greene and Waterman). We are more likely to admit that bias—speech or behavior that can be interpreted as advocacy—is unavoidable. We pay attention to the argument that learning requires passion and advocacy is more passionate than neutrality. We talk more about balance and fairness—about the need to include, reflect and respect all viewpoints on an issue and the value of aiming for mutual understanding and the search for mutually acceptable solutions.

Some of us still argue that educators should be objective (House), while others insist objectivity has its drawbacks and advocacy has a place in the educator's repertoire (Hite). In either case, we increasingly feel compelled to give reasons for our positions. We bring to more conscious and deliberate attention the choice of which stance we think is more ethical, which one best fulfills our responsibility to the public that pays our salaries, or which one we have reason to believe will be more effective in promoting learning and constructive action on pressing public issues. Those, it seems to me, are the important questions to be thinking and talking about.

The second change I see is that we are getting closer to a genuine merger of content and process. Although I know it's an oversimplification, it has always seemed to me that, historically, public policy educators were long on content—about farm issues and farm policy, for example—while community developers were long on process. We are now getting past that dichotomy. In a recent comparative evaluation of eleven projects funded by the Kellogg Foundation, my colleagues and I noted that projects and people that started with an emphasis on information provision often moved in the direction of increasing attention to dialogue, process assistance, local

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focus and intensity of interventions (Hahn, Greene and Waterman). Examples: They added discussion groups to conferences and then learned that better discussions occurred when the groups were instructed to come up with policy recommendations. They invested heavily in developing educational materials, but eventually realized that creating dialogue among diverse interests had a bigger impact. They uncovered a more important role for extension at the county level than they appeared to have envisioned at the beginning, and they adopted strategies like offering mini-grants to support local follow-up activity.

In those projects, content specialists frequently identified a critical role for process assistance, made connections with process specialists, and developed their own process skills. Most likely, they also learned a lot about the unique challenges of presenting technical information in the context of public issues. (With the benefit of hindsight, I wish we had made more inquiries about that in our work for Kellogg). I suspect some of the content specialists learned there is no such thing as neutral information—that every piece of information is good news for some parties to an issue and bad news for others—and they may have found the alternatives-and-consequences framework helpful. I would guess they also learned information is most helpful when it addresses questions to which participants in an issue agree they need answers and that it helps when content specialists let people *know that they know* information alone will not resolve the issues. I think we need to make more effort to tap the lessons content specialists have learned and to help them share their lessons with one another.

I need to acknowledge that some of the Kellogg projects also learned about the limits of process—about the need to provide information as well as dialogue in order to rise above the pooling of ignorance. It simply happened that most of the Kellogg-supported projects were led by content specialists whose learning was often in the process direction. I would expect projects led by process specialists to exhibit more learning in the other direction. There is clearly learning that needs to take place in both directions. Process specialists can increase the impact of their own work by refining their ability to connect it with the work of content specialists.

The third change I see is that we are developing a richer and more complicated picture of how educational impact happens. We still know it is sometimes as easy as laying out the issues, the options and the consequences for key policymakers, who then use the knowledge they have gained from us as they make decisions. But we also know that it is sometimes a lot more complicated. What prevents policymakers from acting is often lack of agreement rather than lack of knowledge. They may need help in reaching agreement—or *help in helping their constituents* reach agreement. In still other cases, policymakers are not our primary audience. We may be working with

citizens who do not understand the policy process very well at all and who need a lot more than a laying out of the issues, the options and the consequences before we can say the educational process is complete.

To meet these more complicated challenges, we are learning that education needs to begin with people's everyday concerns and the label "policy" can be a turnoff. We are learning that process assistance as well as content is needed—and this includes the educational process as well as the policy process. We need to help people understand policy-making; we need to link our educational interventions to the evolution of the policy process; and we need to be sensitive to how different people and groups learn. We are also learning that a single, one-shot educational event is often not enough—that there needs to be ongoing contact and a sequence of activities in order for education to have an impact on individual learning or on the issues. We are learning—or at least we have a hypothesis—that 1) public policy education for newcomers to the policy process is easiest in the local arena; 2) impact on issues requires some kind of match between the scope of the audience and the scope of the issue (in other words, educating people in Illinois about the *national* farm bill is a worthwhile thing to do, but it is not likely to have much detectable impact on the farm bill, at least in the short run); and, consequently, 3) the valuable goal of helping newcomers have an impact on state or national issues will not be realized without a fairly complex, long-term, multi-level educational strategy.

The fourth change I see is that we are finding better language to talk about our objectives and impacts. When we evaluate our work, we continue to do it most frequently in terms of impact on individual learners. Did their "KASA"—their knowledge, attitudes, skills or aspirations (behavioral intentions)—change? But we are at least as interested in impacts on issues or on the policymaking process. We look for such impacts; we talk about them and take pride in them. Examples from the Kellogg projects (Hahn, Greene and Waterman): "References were made in the governor's rural health strategy meeting to things learned during the project's educational program." "There had been antagonism between two school districts, but they participated together in the project's educational program and are now talking about cooperation." "Creation of the state rural development commission was a direct result of the project's statewide workshop." "Language drafted for the county zoning law incorporated protection of groundwater resources as recommended by project participants." Note that the impacts here are not primarily changes in individuals (though changes at that level are certainly involved), but changes of a more general, or collective, nature in how issues are addressed, talked about or dealt with.

Anecdotal evidence of this sort is easy to find. We simply need to be more systematic in looking for such evidence and recording it. I

sometimes wonder if we have done relatively little of this because we are afraid of success. Have we been inhibited from evaluating impacts on issues because reporting them may imply that we have been successful in advocating particular outcomes? Do we worry that asking about impacts on issues might be interpreted as evidence of a desire to influence outcomes in a particular direction? If so, I think the situation is changing. We are beginning to find the language to talk about the impacts we want to have—and to report the impacts we have had—in terms that are publicly defensible. By that, I mean talking not about specific outcomes or influences in particular directions, but about something broader—something that will seem positive to reasonable people on all sides of an issue and especially to the great numbers of citizens who do not like any of the extreme positions. An appropriate measure of success (or failure), for example, might be to document something like *the extent to which we have provided constructive assistance in moving issues toward resolution in ways that reflect the perspectives of policymakers and affected parties on all sides of the issue.*

Such a conception of goals-and-outcome measures brings us closer and closer to the heart of widely-recognized shortcomings in the way politics is practiced in our culture. We have a political system that seems unable to respond effectively to a growing array of public problems. Americans hate politics, according to E. J. Dionne, Jr., because political discourse has become polarized, ideological and unauthentic. Politics has ceased being "a deliberative process through which people [resolve] disputes, [find] remedies and [move] forward" (p. 322). "When Americans watch politics now," Dionne says, " . . . they understand instinctively that [it's] not about finding solutions. It is about discovering postures that offer short-term political benefits" (p. 332).

Interviewers who talk at length with ordinary citizens find they know perfectly well that public issues are complicated (Sanders; Harwood; Gamson; Graber). They know there are no easy answers. They know that compromises and creative problem solving are needed. The fault they find with politics is not that it is too complex, but that it oversimplifies and polarizes and fails to explore the ambiguous gray areas between the extreme positions. Studies relying on qualitative interviews suggest citizens are not apathetic even though they want nothing to do with politics as it is currently practiced (Harwood). They long for a politics they can trust, and, above all, they want solutions that are fair (Sanders; Hochschild). They would like it if things worked out in their favor, but, if forced to choose, they opt for outcomes that are fair for everybody. I know at least two studies that reached that conclusion. In one, in which twenty-six individuals in Utica, New York, were interviewed at length, no less than half of the interviewees mentioned at least one policy they approved even though it hurt them personally (Sanders).

Examples include a tavern owner who favored a higher drinking age, a retired person who favored budget cuts even though his pension would be smaller, and a defense worker who believed defense spending should be cut.

Interviews with policymakers reveal a similar degree of dissatisfaction with politics, but many of them have only limited views of how relationships with citizens could be different (Harwood). Policymakers' interactions with citizens tend to be limited to one-on-one conversations or shouting matches at meetings at which issues have already reached the boiling point. Neither situation lends itself to the development of wide-ranging mutual understanding. Many policymakers see policy-making as a burden that they are not expected to share. They believe they are supposed to have the answers or, if they do not, that it is their job to find them. They envision little possibility of a larger role for citizens.

At least some policymakers, however, appreciate opportunities to get beyond the surface of public opinion and to understand why people hold the views they do (Perry). They like it when citizens have a chance to get a better understanding of issues and see they are not black and white. In a California case reported in the *Journal of Extension,* city officials who were "frustrated by the 'no-win' attitude at public meetings and the lack of community leadership on pressing issues" asked extension to help create a citizen "sounding board" to "analyze important community issues, report potential solutions and their consequences, and make recommendations" (Rilla and Reedy). In New York, a state legislator who had groups on all sides of an issue "yelling" at him asked extension in one of the counties to get industry, environmental, community and legislative representatives together to come up with recommendations for educational or legislative responses. (The issue involved spraying herbicides on utility right-of-ways. It was related to me in a personal conversation). I am sure many of you could cite similar examples.

Evidence like this points to a widely-recognized societal need that is awfully close to what I believe is our evolving understanding of public policy education. Am I in too much of a dream world if I envision extension playing a prominent role in filling this critical niche? Extension is badly in need of a new public image. It has tried to shake a too-narrowly-agricultural image, but, as I see it, has moved in so many different directions it is hard for anyone outside the organization to make sense of it—even those who have great respect for its work. We are evolving a conception and a practice of public policy education that resonates with a widely-recognized societal need, and that conception and practice have the potential to be a common theme woven through every extension program. We have reached a point at which Patrick Boyle, former director of extension in Wisconsin, has called public policy education a "path to political support" and a recent Extension Committee on Organization and

Policy (ECOP) position statement envisions extension in the twenty-first century as "known for benefiting society" through its ability to address controversial issues, facilitate public discourse, provide relevant knowledge and increase the likelihood of collaborative solutions. I think we are getting there. The question is whether we will do so in time.

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